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Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

Standing Committee on Social Programs

Review of the 2000/2001 Interim Appropriations

Chair: Mr. J. Michael Miltenberger

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Standing Committee on Social Programs

March 21, 2000

SPEAKER
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Mr. Speaker:

The Standing Committee on Social Programs is pleased to present its Report on the Review of the 2000/2001 Interim Appropriations.

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14th Assembly

Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories

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Health and Social Services

The Committee met with the Minister and her staff on March 17, 2000 to review the Interim Appropriation for the Department. The Committee made note of the following issues.

Equitable Funding to Aboriginal Governments

The Committee was concerned with the yearly grant made to the Dene Nation under the Population Health activity in the amount of $143,000. With the departure of several aboriginal groups from the Dene Nation, Committee Members wondered if the grant should be given to the individual aboriginal governments. The Department has agreed to review the grant and provide the Committee with information on the history and reasoning for the continuing of the grant and how the government might adapt the funding to address the issue of equitability.

Digital Communication Network – Ardicom Ltd.

The Committee was very concerned that the Digital Communication Network was not meeting the needs of the Government of the Northwest Territories. The Committee heard that the lack of bandwidth is impacting on the ability of the Department of Health and Social Services to implement its Telehealth program. This is apparently also a problem with the Department of Education, Culture and Employment and impacts on their ability to deliver distance education programs.

Committee Members believe that the further development of the Telehealth network is an important link in the Department's goal to provide better and more cost-effective healthcare to northerners.

The Government of the Northwest Territories has invested significant fiscal resources in the development of the Digital Communications Network. Committee Members believe that if this investment has been for four-year old technology that can no longer meet the needs of the Department it may be time for the Government to seek other options.

The Committee strongly encourages the Department to work in conjunction with the Department of Education, Culture and Employment and the Financial Management Board to resolve the outstanding bandwidth issues with Ardicom and the Digital Communication Network and looks forward to positive resolution of the issue.

Forced Growth as Part of the Interim Appropriation

It became apparent as the Committee reviewed the Departments within its envelope, that there were several different interpretations of what forced growth was. The Committee heard that the Department has submitted an estimate of $5.1M to FMB for forced growth to be included in the Department's Main Estimates. The Committee also heard that, unlike the other Departments in the Social Envelope, a four-month portion of the $5.1M forced growth requirement was not factored in the Interim Appropriation.

The Committee questions how it can be expected to offer valid criticism on the state of department finances when it is kept in isolation of important facts. In approving the Interim Appropriation, the Committee will be essentially approving the department's budget for one-third of the year. Committee Members believe that by not factoring in forced growth in the Interim Appropriation, possible belt-tightening exercises that should follow, may be impossible to implement in the last two-thirds of the year.

Committee Members were disappointed that all forced growth was not factored into the department's Interim Appropriation and that they were not informed of this omission from the outset of the review. It was only the questioning of the Committee Members that brought this matter to light. In the future the Committee recommends that the Department or the Financial Management Board provide notes that describe exceptions in the way the Department presents its information.

Nurse Practitioners

Members were particularly interested in the development of a Healthcare System that utilizes Nurse Practitioners, in conjunction with Physicians, to treat patients in the Northwest Territories communities.

Committee Members are well aware of the problems the Boards and the Department are having in attracting Physicians to the North. Consequently, this doctor shortage has led to excessive waits for appointments at medical clinics and a resultant increased usage of emergency room services, particularly in Yellowknife.

Committee Members believe if well-trained Nurse Practitioners provided front-line service and dealt with the minor complaints, that Doctors would be able to concentrate on the patients that truly needed their attention.

There may be some resistance on the part of residents, used to dealing with Doctors for every complaint, to a Nurse Practitioner based system. However, Committee Members believe that this is the best option that the Department and the Boards have in meeting the Doctor shortage in the larger communities. After all, the Community Nurses have been providing quality Healthcare to residents of our smaller communities for years and are the backbone of our rural healthcare system.

The Committee strongly encourages all parties to seriously examine the role that Nurse Practitioners could play in the delivery of Healthcare. The Committee looks forward to reviewing an implementation plan for a Nurse Practitioner Program during the Business Plan.

Early Childhood Education and Programs

Committee Members are very concerned that given the lack of money available for Early Childhood programming that there be a coordinated effort between the Department, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment, the Federal Government and any aboriginal government delivering such programming. This coordination is essential, if governments as a whole want to make progress in meeting the needs of our youngest residents and provide the children with the head start that they need to be successful in life.

It is the Committee's hope that a proactive, cooperative approach could be developed between all levels of government involved in Early Childhood Programming. The Committee expects to review a coordinated effort on Early Childhood Programming during the Business Plan Review.

Undedicated Capital Funds

Committee Members were very concerned that they were being asked to approve $200,000 for New Capital Projects in the Interim Appropriation. Members were uncomfortable with not knowing the specifics of what and where the project was to be located. Committee Members believe that giving approval, at a time when other capital projects are being deferred, was tantamount to the Committee giving the Department permission to operate a "slush fund". This "slush fund" would not be subject to the oversight the Committee exercises over other capital projects.

The Committee also noted that the Department is proposing $250,000 in carry-over funding in the Interim Appropriation for the possible renovation of the Territorial Treatment Centre in Yellowknife. In the minds of the Committee Members the Department's explanation of the variables needed to fall in to place for this renovation to proceed meant little chance of a start within the 4-month window covered by the Interim Appropriation. The explanation that one the major variables involve decisions by a Board outside the direct control of the Government reinforced the Committee's belief that the Department's timeline for the renovation was overly optimistic. Committee Members could not justify the inclusion of the renovation to the Territorial Treatment Centre in the Interim Appropriation.

In the future, the Committee would like to see the specifics of major capital projects. It is believed that the Department has had sufficient time to evaluate the condition of the infrastructure inherited from the Federal Government in the Health Transfer and that a plan to address the inadequacies should be in place.

Unless the Committee can be convinced otherwise, the Committee looks forward to being presented with a plan for new capital projects during the Business Plan Review.

Inuvik Hospital

There was some concern on the part of Committee Members that the single largest capital project the Government will be involved with in the upcoming fiscal year was not mentioned in the Interim Appropriation or in the Department's presentation to the Committee.

The Committee does understand that the Inuvik Hospital is scheduled as a 3P Project and as such there are no funds committed in the Interim Appropriation. However, as a matter of public education, the Committee would like to make the Department's responses to Member's questions on the timelines for the project a matter of public record.

The Request for Proposal closes on April 28th, 2000. There will be three to four weeks required for evaluation of the different proposals. Once the evaluation is completed a recommendation will be made to the Financial Management Board. If the Board accepts the recommendation, negotiations will be entered into with the successful proponent on the actual lease and development agreements. The Financial Management Board then gives these agreements. It is hoped that this process would only take until late May or early June and that actual construction can begin shortly thereafter.

Department of Justice

The Standing Committee met with the Minister and his officials on March 17, 2000 and offers the following comments on the Interim Appropriation for the Department of Justice.

Per Diem Rates for Wilderness Camps

The Members of the Committee are concerned that the Per Diem rates offered to operators of Wilderness Camps for adult and Young Offenders have not kept pace with inflation and the program requirements implemented by the Department since the introduction of this valuable rehabilitation program.

Committee Members realize that the scope of the program has moved beyond what the Department initially envisioned. Nonetheless the Committee believes that the Department has a responsibility to ensure the adequacy of fiscal resources provided to operators on a regular basis.

Committee Members think that the Department must do a better job in communicating the application process involved in replacing capital assets to the Wilderness Camp Operators. According to what individual Committee Members have been told, some camp operators are eligible for capital funding, whereas other operators are not eligible

for any funding. If this is the case, Committee Members are concerned about the equity of access to capital funding for camp operators. Committee Members believe that a lack of policy or standards for the accessing of capital funding may be causing animosity between camp operators and regions. This apparent shortfall needs to be addressed by the Department.

The Members of the Committee were uncomfortable in being asked to approve $75,000 in the Interim Appropriation for the replacement of boats and motors without information on which Camp or Open Custody Facility would receive the funding. As with the Department of Health and Social Services, Members believe that they were being asked to approve a "slush fund" that would not be subject to Committee oversight.

Members are concerned that the apparent choice being offered to inmates as to which camp they wish to go to may be affecting the viability of some operators. A camp that offers hot and cold running water would certainly be more appealing than a camp that has no running water. Members believe that it may be desirable to develop a policy to determine which Wilderness Camps an offender can attend. Committee would like to discuss this issue further during the Business Plan Review.

The Committee looks forward to the Main Estimates and the opportunity to review the Department's plan to address per diem rates for Wilderness Camp Operators.

Legal Services Board

The Committee is concerned about the state of the Legal Services Board and the demise of the Mackenzie Valley Court Workers as a distinct entity. Members look forward to further information on the activities of the Legal Services Board, its plans for a regionally representative Board once Nunavut establishes their own Board, the future of the Beaufort-Delta Legal Clinic and the vision that the Board has for the next millenium.

Committee Members have had concerns expressed to them by former Board Members of the Mackenzie Valley Courtworkers that they did not understand the reasons their Board was dissolved.

The Committee appreciated the commitment on the part of the Minister to convey these reasons in writing to the former Board Members of the Mackenzie Valley Courtworkers. The Committee would appreciate being copied any correspondence.

Federal Inmates in Northwest Territories Correctional Facilities

The Members of the Committee can see that the initial projections on the usage of Northwest Territorial Correctional Facilities by the Government of Nunavut were overly optimistic. Although this may change in the future, the Committee agrees with the Department's decision not to count on Nunavut in developing capital projections on the replacement of the Yellowknife Correctional Centre. However, to replace the previously anticipated service payments from Nunavut, the Committee would like to encourage the Department in pursuing the placement of northern federal inmates in our system once we

have capability. Beside the obvious financial benefit to the GNWT in payments from the Federal Government, there are rehabilitative benefits that can be realized for these repatriated northern federal prisoners.

Committee Members are of the opinion that federal inmates could also benefit from the Department's innovative Wilderness Camp program. Committee Members believe that this provides inmates with an excellent opportunity to reintegrate into their community and traditional lifestyle and may lessen the shock of going from an institution to a community. Another positive feature of repatriating federal prisoners north is that families will have an increased opportunity to visit and support their incarcerated loved ones.

The Committee looks forward to being apprised of the results of the official's meeting scheduled at the end of this month on this subject.

Community Constable Program

Some Members of the Committee have heard good things from their constituents on the success of the community constable program but there are concerns that some communities can not reasonably access the program. If a community does not receive adequate funding from MACA to fund a by-law officer position, this program is essentially useless to that community.

In addition to providing valuable assistance to RCMP Officers in some of our smaller communities, this program serves as an important training step for aboriginal people seeking a possible career in law enforcement as RCMP Officers. Members are concerned that the Department of Justice's goal of developing a representative police force is negatively impacted by funding deficiencies from MACA to the communities.

The Committee strongly encourages the Department to continue, and if possible, expand the program. With the federal funding for this program expiring at the end of the 2000/2001 fiscal year, it is imperative that the Department works with the Solicitor General to maintain and augment the program.

Northwest Territories Housing Corporation

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met with the Minister and his officials on March 17, 2000 and would like to offer comment on the following issues of importance noted during the Committee's review of the Interim Appropriations.

Allocation of Senior's Housing

Committee Members are very concerned over the annual indecision on the placement of Senior's Housing between the Department of Health and Social Services and the Housing Corporation. Members believe this indecision could lead to possible construction delays

because of shipping deadlines being missed. The indecision also raises the question of potential political interference in the choice of the community that receives the senior's housing.

The Housing Corporation believes that the Housing Needs Survey in conjunction with community consultation on the part of the Housing Corporation should be adequate to determine which community requires the facility. The Committee strongly encourages the Housing Corporation to work with the Department of Health and Social Services to resolve this issue. Members look forward to positive news during the review of the Business Plans.

Seniors' Housing Issues

Members have heard in some communities there are units dedicated to seniors that are vacant. According to what Members have heard, the vacancies relate to design flaws in the units themselves and the lack of consultation with elders in the community as to whether they wanted to move into new units in the first place.

The Members have heard that the standard design for the senior's 4-plex's mean that the units entrances are set too high for seniors to access safely. This may have been appropriate as the design standard when the Housing Corporation was building in the high arctic but lacks relevance for construction below the treeline.

It is apparent to the Committee that the senior's 4-plexs may not be appropriate in smaller, predominately aboriginal communities, where traditional activities are still a way of life. Some Committee Members believe that it would be better to build small stand-alone houses in these types of communities utilizing simple technologies that the elders understand.

Members have heard of instances where the lack of consultation between the Local Housing Authorities and Elders has meant reluctance on the part of seniors to move into newly constructed seniors' facilities. The design of the units does not incorporate adequate area for elders to store equipment to participate in traditional activities. This also contributes to the reluctance on the part of seniors to move into seniors units.

This still leaves the issue of what to do with the vacant senior's units in the communities. Committee Members believe that if there are no seniors in need of the units that it should be turned into social housing units. We are still facing a housing crisis, particularly for single-parent families and these units, and any other surplus government units, should be utilized. There is also the option of these units being used to house teachers or healthcare professionals in communities where there is no viable rental market.

Leaseback of Social Housing from Local Development Corporations

The Committee is very interested in the possibility of leveraging more money for social housing by entering into long-term leaseback arrangements with local or aboriginal

development corporations for the construction of additional social housing units. It is clear to the Committee that the Federal Government's withdrawal from the funding of social housing has meant the Territorial Government has been playing a desperate game of catch-up in trying to meet the housing needs of its residents. Innovative approaches, such as leasebacks with development corporations, will help the Housing Corporation stretch its always-diminishing dollars. Committee Members look forward to discussing this issue further during the Business Plan Review.

Repair/Maintenance of Social Housing

Committee Members were interested in reviewing the Housing Corporation's plan for the repair and maintenance of Social Housing over the three-year period, once it is complete.

EDAP Program Review

Several Committee Members were concerned that the Extended Downpayment Assistance Program was not meeting the needs of residents of our smallest communities. A "Catch-22" situation exists for residents who make too much money to qualify for Downpayment Assistance directly from the Housing Corporation. These residents also can not qualify for a regular mortgage from the banks because they do not hold title to the land on which they propose to build a house.

Committee Members believe that a review of the EDAP Program as it relates to residents of smaller communities is in order. This review should include consideration of how the Housing Corporation can help those residents who make sufficient money to look after their own housing needs, but can not access Housing Corporation Programs or Bank Mortgages.

Department of Education, Culture and Employment

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met with the Minister and his officials on March 16, 2000 and offers the following comments on the review of the Department's Interim Appropriations.

Income Support and Disability Payments

The Committee is very concerned about the adequacy of income support for residents with disabilities. Committee Members have been told that the amounts available were no longer in line with benefits available to disabled residents of other Canadian jurisdictions. The Committee was pleased to hear the Minister to commit to reviewing the amounts provided by other Canadian jurisdictions for disabilities under Income Support Programs. The Committee looks forward to reviewing this survey with the Minister and working together with the Department to adjust income support levels for disabled persons should it be warranted.

Committee Members are also concerned that there has not been an adjustment made to the Food Basket price which is used to determine the dollar amounts for Income Support in quite some time.

Members of the Committee were somewhat pleased to hear that there will be a review of the Food Basket price in the upcoming fiscal year. However, Member would prefer to see this review done sooner than later so that the impact of potential increases to income support payments might be examined in conjunction with the Business Plans and Main Estimates.

Adult Basic Education Funding

The Committee Members are extremely concerned that the majority of funding for Basic Adult Education Programs sunsets at the end of March and that there are no apparent programs to replace this funding. Committee Members can not fathom how this government expects residents to take advantage of employment opportunities in our burgeoning resource sector with the minimal education levels that exist in some of our smaller communities.

There may be some validity to the Department's argument that money for Adult Basic Education did not have to be in the Interim Appropriation because these programs are not typically offered in the summer months. However, Committee Members strongly believe that this lack of available funding come April 1st, 2000 may impact on the ability of smaller Non-Governmental Organizations to survive until such time as funding may be forthcoming.

Committee Members believe that the issue of Adult Basic Education is so important that it merits the same consideration shown to the Working Together Program and should be included in the Interim Appropriation.

Digital Communication Network – Ardicom Ltd.

Committee Members heard from the Minister that the Department spends approximately $2.0M in supporting the Digital Communication Network. Whether the Department of Education, Culture and Employment moves to a charge back model and make other Departments pay their fair share of the costs involved; does not affect the stated issue that there is insufficient band-width to meet the needs of Government.

The Committee strongly recommends that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment work in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Services and the Financial Management Board to resolve the issues with the Digital Communications Network.

Special Needs in the Classroom

In light of the proposed increases in Special Needs Funding encapsulated in Bill # 1 it is apparent to Committee Members that the Department must develop policies and a formula to ensure that the increased funding is dispersed wisely and equitably to all District Education Authorities. Committee Members hope that the formula could take into account the tendency of families with children having learning disabilities to migrate to "magnet communities".

Committee Members look forward to reviewing the formulas and policies that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment develops to ensure the equitable distribution of Special Needs funding.